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The #PandemicReading Aesthetic: A Photo Essay of Quarantine Reading

Introduction

SLIDE 1 Thank you for sticking around until the very end of the conference, everyone. I'll try my best to help make it worth your while.

Before we get started here, I want to stress that this is not a conventional argumentative paper. Instead, it is an informal exploration of what is happening right now. It is taking tea with our peers. It is gentle conversation. It is being welcomed into others' homes and catching glimpses of lived experiences behind closed doors.

SLIDE 2 For the past six months, the READ-IT project team has been soliciting photos and commentary related to what they call #PandemicReading and #PandemicBookshelves. Accepted through the READ-IT online portal (read-it.in-two.com) and Twitter, submissions have been plentiful and diverse. In this paper, I focus on Twitter submissions in particular, given this platform's supplementary element of interactivity. Twitter allows insight not only into what, where, and how people are reading, but also how others may respond to those practices.

SLIDE 3 The #PandemicReading Twitter hashtag has actually predated both the READ-IT initiative and the declaration of a global pandemic itself, with the first public tweet being from 29 February 2020; this tweet adds to a reading list entitled 'What to Read During a Pandemic' [<https://twitter.com/BrianFaughnan/status/1233753697848561665>]. Further, many seem to be using the hashtag without awareness of contributing to this campaign. For this reason, only publicly-shared tweets are referenced in this talk. It should also be noted that #PandemicReading is an active hashtag on Instagram, although Instagram posts have not been included here due to scope.

Scrolling through the publicly-available Twitter submissions, I began establishing categories of individuals based on my interpretations of their contributions. Once again, I would like to remind you that this is not a conventional argumentative paper, and I would hardly deem this a "scientific" study. As reading always is, my interpretations are subjective and undoubtedly reflect my own perceptions and expectations of pandemic reading. Moreover, I have opted to use recent news articles and reports instead of more scholarly resources to support my study in an effort to provide further and up-to-date evidence of the current state for any future researchers who may have the pleasure of reviewing this work. Consider this paper a curated romp through quarantined madness, a blurry snapshot of unprecedented instability.

SLIDE 4 The three broad categories that I have identified, and which will direct the course of this paper are:

1. Reactive Readers
2. Excited Authors
3. Digitally-Engaged Institutions

Reactive Readers

In an essay for *The New Yorker*, Evan Kindley writes about why Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* resonates with 'readers under quarantine' as Clarissa Dalloway grapples with returning to everyday

life after influenza.¹ As #PandemicReading tweets show, though, readers are not only turning to canonical books that speak directly to the issues at hand, but also those books that they just haven't had the time or inclination to read before. **SLIDE 5** They are, however, taking some strange precautions before they begin reading:

[<https://twitter.com/shepherdessjess/status/1243020100015292416> and <https://twitter.com/WritePubSell/status/1275919190856282112>].

There are many kinds of readers using the #PandemicReading and #PandemicBookshelves hashtags.

SLIDE 6 There are those who are excited to show others what they are reading or – what seems more probable – what they plan to read

[<https://twitter.com/pinktiqs/status/1262442375810396160> and https://twitter.com/filming_chicago/status/1238864605297938434 and https://twitter.com/Shaf_Towheed/status/1298215358692720640].

SLIDE 7 There are those readers who are embracing the bleakness of the times

[<https://twitter.com/todayimjack/status/1254572864490987520> and <https://twitter.com/LucRodriguez89/status/1287165541350813698> and <https://twitter.com/itsheratime/status/1287176337619222528> and <https://twitter.com/TaraMcEndo/status/1243459007592841217>].

SLIDE 8 Some are returning to the classics

[<https://twitter.com/pauldinaseditor/status/1287782139690352640> and <https://twitter.com/LSwann/status/1273356257471143938> and <https://twitter.com/chelsiie/status/1297020099581411330>].

SLIDE 9 And then there are those readers who are combining #PandemicReading with other luxuries

[<https://twitter.com/KavitaMNA/status/1239365435222523907> and https://twitter.com/Empress_Marsha/status/1303516208927444993 and <https://twitter.com/pjbennett1959/status/1288594627826716672>].

SLIDE 10 And, further, there are those who have chosen to eschew pleasure in favour of more academic pursuits [<https://twitter.com/lagbolt/status/1285010622522863617> and

<https://twitter.com/RunWriteTeach/status/1242918662362796037> and <https://twitter.com/monicaMedHist/status/1263987085720956931> and <https://twitter.com/SafiraLeaf/status/1242450896988053513> and https://twitter.com/Kaitie_Obryan/status/1240819671584002048].

Resilient Authors

SLIDE 11 But readers are not the only ones engaging with #PandemicReading. Established and amateur authors are also continuing to release books, write fan fiction, and chat with their readers

[<https://twitter.com/GingerGorman/status/1288321181003558913> and <https://twitter.com/StelloThe/status/1283524588014571521> and <https://twitter.com/susanwiggis/status/1290429723345137664> and <https://twitter.com/Adelheide1121/status/1241052972101976065>].

Indeed, as an article on e-book platform BookBub explains, authors are proving themselves to be incredibly resilient during this time. Acknowledging the current crisis, authors are being flexible about their launch dates and parties, offering their books for free or at discounted rates, and engaging with current and prospective readers in a variety of fresh ways

¹ Evan Kindey, 'Why Anxious Readers Under Quarantine Turn to "Mrs. Dalloway"', *The New Yorker* (10 April 2020) < <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/why-anxious-readers-under-quarantine-turn-to-virginia-woolfs-mrs-dalloway> > [accessed 4 October 2020].

(<https://insights.bookbub.com/authors-book-promotion-covid-19>).² This is all despite the European Writers' Council's observations of the very real threats and negative implications of COVID on authors and cultural industries related to the book market.³ Nevertheless, there appears to have been a substantial increase in submissions to publishing houses,⁴ and established fiction authors have been changing their novels in response to medical and social developments.⁵

Digitally-Engaged Institutions

SLIDE 12 Similarly, businesses and organisations have altered their conventional practices in light of recent events, as well as increased expectations for social distancing and digital access [https://twitter.com/GMU_English/status/1286027013002801152 and <https://twitter.com/thebookstall/status/1292551468327854086> and https://twitter.com/Reading_Reba/status/1296479411244544000].

Libraries have been especially adaptive. As one author and parent declared in an opinion piece for *The Washington Post*, 'Covid-19 took away our family's second home: the library.'⁶ Nevertheless, another US source writes that 'Despite COVID-19, King County libraries still put on a show,'⁷ and a recent Carnegie UK Trust report on UK public library services shows that libraries have had a largely positive impact on those who have engaged with them during lockdown.⁸

SLIDE 13 And there are those businesses having a positive impact by just trying to have a little fun [<https://twitter.com/thebookstall/status/1274386928037756929>].

Conclusion

Shortly after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, author Ann Patchett described one of her recent reading experiences in a short essay for *The New York Times* about 'Why We Need Life-Changing Books Right Now'. **SLIDE 14** 'I felt as if I had just stepped through a magic portal, and all I had to do to pass through was believe that I wasn't too big to fit,' she writes. 'This beautiful world had been available to me all along but I had never bothered to pick up the keys to the kingdom.'⁹ From the beginning of this pandemic, books have been framed as escapes from lockdown, as friends in isolation, and as means for keeping connected to a world that has seems ever-more shut off.

² Diana Urban, 'How Authors Are Approaching Book Promotion During COVID-19', *BookBub* (2 April 2020) <<https://insights.bookbub.com/authors-book-promotion-covid-19>> [accessed 21 October 2020].

³ 'COVID-19: Impact on Authors and the EU Book Sector', *European Writers' Council* <<http://europeanwriterscouncil.eu/corona-crisis-impact-on-authors>> [accessed 21 October 2020].

⁴ David Barnett, 'Finally working on that novel as you self-isolate? You're not alone', *The Guardian* (26 March 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2020/mar/26/novel-writing-during-coronavirus-crisis-outbreak>> [accessed 21 October 2020].

⁵ Alison Flood, 'No pubs, no kissing, no flying: how Covid-19 is forcing authors to change their novels', *The Guardian* (1 June 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jun/01/no-pubs-no-kissing-no-flying-how-covid-19-is-forcing-authors-to-change-their-novels>> [accessed 21 October 2020].

⁶ Maggie Smith, 'Covid-19 took away our family's second home: The library', *The Washington Post* (19 October 2020) <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/10/20/public-library-closed-covid-19/>> [accessed 21 October 2020].

⁷ Lisa Rosenblum, 'Despite COVID-19, King County libraries still put on a show', *Bellevue Reporter* (20 October 2020) <<https://www.bellevuereporter.com/life/despite-covid-19-king-county-libraries-still-put-on-a-show>> [accessed 21 October 2020].

⁸ Jenny Peachey, 'Making a Difference: Libraries, Lockdown and Looking Ahead' (Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust, 2020) <https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2020/10/13090335/Overarching-report-Making-a-Difference-1.pdf> [accessed 21 October 2020].

⁹ Ann Patchett, 'Ann Patchett on Why We Need Life-Changing Books Right Now', *The New York Times* (30 March 2020) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/books/review/kate-dicamillo-ann-patchett.html>> [accessed 4 October 2020].

SLIDE 15 In an article for LitHub, Siri Hustvedt extolls the particular value of reading fiction during this pandemic, writing that '[w]hen it is good, literature moves the personal into other territory altogether and in the process becomes collective.'¹⁰ As we have seen through the #PandemicReading and #PandemicBookshelves hashtags, though, it is not just fiction that has served to bind us as we cope with the international trauma of this global pandemic. The words of others, bound together in physical tomes or digital bytes, remind us – regardless of genre – that we are not alone, and that this situation is not permanent. **SLIDE 16** As one Twitter user quoted from Lance Morrow's *Evil: An Investigation*, 'Words are conjurations; there is a healing power in stories, if only because words take us away to other lives and places—the consolations of alternatives are, if only temporary, a way of thwarting fate.'¹¹ But books do not just transport us to imagined worlds. They teach us new things, and help us make sense of our world as it was, as it is, and as it will be.

SLIDE 17 To end this talk with a #PandemicReading tweet, with books and some hand sanitiser, we have everything we need to survive
[<https://twitter.com/chrisdocnee/status/1239346956977102848>].

¹⁰ Siri Hustvedt, 'Fairy Tales and Facts: Siri Hustvedt on How We Read in a Pandemic', *Literary Hub* (13 April 2020) <<https://lithub.com/fairy-tales-and-facts-siri-hustvedt-on-how-we-read-in-a-pandemic>> [accessed 4 October 2020].

¹¹ Lance Morrow, quoted by Grayson Rone, '@grayson_rone', *Twitter* (19 July 2020) <https://twitter.com/grayson_rone/status/1284876580653850625> [accessed 4 October 2020]